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Terrorist targets in our back yard

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FROM STAFF AND NEWS SERVICE REPORTS

WASHINGTON - More than 100 facilities nationwide that store large amounts of lethal chemicals - including seven in New Jersey - are near communities of at least 1 million people, congressional researchers say.

Officials are concerned that the plants, located in 23 states, are tempting targets for terrorist attacks.

The tally of plants was compiled by the Congressional Research Service using Environmental Protection Agency data. The report, scheduled for release today, represents one of the first public state-by-state breakdowns of the proximity of potentially deadly facilities to the nation's largest population centers.

About one-fifth of the nation's chemical facilities - which number more than 10,000 - are near population centers.

A spokesman for New Jersey Sen. Jon Corzine, who introduced a bill after Sept. 11 to upgrade security at chemical plants, said the report confirmed the senator's stand.

"This CRS report underscores something that Senator Corzine has been talking about for nearly four years now," said David Wald.

"This information is based on risk management plans that are filed with the EPA, and it just underscores why the danger is there and why the senator has been trying since October 2001 to get uniform federal security standards for chemical facilities."

Bradley Campbell, commissioner of the state's Department of Environmental Protection, agreed.

"I think this information highlights the importance of moving forward with Senator Corzine's proposed standards for security at chemical plants," he said. "It also reinforces our intention to seek comparable state level standards if that legislation does not move forward."

The survey provided state-by-state figures but did not specify the names of the facilities or the cities in which they are located. The report lists seven facilities in New Jersey.

The EPA refuses to release its own list of dangerous chemical manufacturing plants, oil refineries and storage facilities, saying that doing so could aid terrorists' plans.

However, a 2003 database compiled by environmental groups said the dangerous chemical facilities include the Infineum USA Bayway chemical plant in Linden.

"Nobody wants us handing out information that people with nefarious things on their minds would use to their advantage," EPA spokesman Dale Kemery said.

Sgt. Stephen Jones, a spokesman for the New Jersey State Police, echoed those sentiments, saying that while the state police had plans to deal with potential attacks, "I don't think it would be prudent to talk about those plans, given the game plans of the enemy."

Experts said the number of injuries or deaths caused by emissions of chemical explosives or toxic gases would depend largely on unpredictable factors, such as wind current or the volume of the leak. But they agreed the report highlights the continued danger of questionable security practices at plants.

If released, the toxic chemicals can "cause poison gas clouds to kill people," said Andy Igrejas, a chemical industry watchdog at the National Environmental Trust. "It's violent deaths you're talking about - it melts your lungs, essentially."

The report, completed at the request of Rep. Edward J. Markey, D-Mass., comes as the Homeland Security

Department considers tougher federal regulation of the chemical industry, which has largely policed its own security procedures.

"Chemical facilities are at the top of the terrorists' target list, and I thought it would be helpful for the full picture to be presented," Markey said in an interview Tuesday.

Robert Stephan, Homeland Security acting undersecretary, testified before congressional committees last month. "It has become clear that the entirely voluntary efforts of these companies alone will not sufficiently address security for the entire sector," he said.

However, Stephan estimated that fewer than 10,000 people would be killed and 40,000 sickened in a worst-case chemical release.

Homeland Security officials have said only a small number of facilities - perhaps as few as a handful - have the capacity to cause widespread damage.

Several industry representatives contacted Tuesday declined immediate comment.

The report estimates at least 106 and as many as 111 plants are located near population centers of 1 million people or more.

As many as 29 of the plants are in Texas - more than twice as many than in any other state.

Kemery, the EPA spokesman, and environmental experts agreed that the overall estimate represents a drop from 123 plants five years ago - partially because of industry efforts to use alternatives to the deadly chemicals or to move away from densely populated areas.

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, who also supports Corzine's bill, said concerned citizens should talk to their local officials about early warning systems and evacuation plans in the event of an emergency.

He added that since 9/11, information on potential hazards that used to be readily available to the public is now much harder to find. Withholding information from the public doesn't keep it from terrorists, however, Tittel said. "All you have to do is drive down the turnpike," he said. "What we [the public] don't know could kill us."

Staff Writer Adrienne Lu contributed to this article, which also contains material from The Associated Press.

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